

THE EARLY HISTOBY OF THE LOLL.ABDS

to keep company and to act together. Perhaps the Bishops of Salisbury, Hereford, Worcester and Bath were known to be more lax or more kindly than their brothers of Canterbury and Norwich, who were famous for their antagonism to heretics. Perhaps the distance from Westminster and Canterbury, the proximity of the Welsh mountains for a refuge, the deep forests and dells of Hereford and Monmouth, the trackless moors round Stonehenge and the miry lanes of Somerset, gave the pedestrian better chances of avoiding the Bishop's mounted messenger than could be found in the more highly civilised shires of Eastern and central England.

It is impossible to say when the first Wycliffite preacher appeared in the West. Wycliffe had been regarded as a force in the country before the Eising of 1381, and although there is no proof that he himself sanctioned or commissioned any 'Poor Priests' at that early date, there were even then popular preachers, who carried about versions of his doctrines, together with their own views on Church or State. Such persons in all probability had set floating in the West reports of the new movement in Oxford. But the first missionary in those parts of whom we have any certain knowledge is that typical Wycliffite, John Aston, who walked into Gloucester, staff in hand, one day in September 1382. The churchmen were beating the religious drum round the country to raise men and money for Bishop Spencer's Flemish crusade, while Wycliffe in reply was carrying on a vigorous pamphlet controversy. The crusaders were strongest in the Eastern Counties, but even in Gloucester Aston found the recruiting and the trade in Papal pardons going on briskly. They furnished him with a text. He declared that those who were working for the crusade were inducing Christians to endow murder, that the religious war-cry was of all things the most wicked, that the Bishops, who were selling pardons for this pious purpose, were sons of the devil. Five years later he was still at work in the same diocese.¹

But he was not all that time alone
or confined to

¹ Knighton, ii. 178; Wilkins, **iii. 202-8**